

The American Reaction to the 1968 Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia

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## INTRODUCTION

August 20, 1968 was a fateful date in the history of Czechoslovakia. That night, armies from the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Bulgaria launched a surprise invasion to suppress the country's process of liberalization known as "socialism with a human face." August 20 also was a date of importance to President Lyndon B. Johnson of the United States. The President was making final preparations for a nuclear arms limitation summit meeting with the Soviet leaders that he was going to announce the following day. Throughout his presidency, Johnson had been working to achieve what he hoped would amount to an eventual peace between the Eastern and Western worlds. He made promoting détente a priority, and endeavored to uphold and expand upon an American policy that supported and encouraged freedom and democracy in the East. Now at the end of his term, Johnson was growing more optimistic about achieving a major breakthrough with the Soviet Union. He believed that the conflict in Vietnam was going to tarnish his legacy, and he desperately wanted to end his presidency with a major international success. As it turned out though, the attack on Czechoslovakia forced the postponement and ultimate cancelation of Johnson's hopes and plans. The news of the invasion took the White House by surprise, even though there had been ample intelligence suggesting that such a move by the Warsaw Pact was quite possible.

President Johnson was so caught up in the Vietnam conflict, and focused on his efforts at détente and improving his legacy, that when he was told of the invasion, he responded with those factors in mind. When he undertook action, he made sure to orchestrate only a minimal rhetorical response that in no way threatened his personal or political goals. The official response from the White House, however, differed from the

response by other political circles and the public. The U.S Congress and American public largely responded with outrage, and called for firm and decisive action against the invaders. The President and his staff chose to follow a different path. Instead of listening to the desires of many in the country and government, or of following the trend of American support for freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe, Johnson decided upon a path that would minimize confrontation with the East. In doing so, he demonstrated that the invasion of Czechoslovakia, at least within the broader aspects of the Cold War, was just simply not that important.

Johnson, for better or worse, was focused on furthering relations with the Soviets during his last days in office. Whether out of his concern for peace and détente, or for improving his legacy, Lyndon Johnson did nothing to upset the Soviets. As a result, the U.S. government lent no assistance to Czechoslovakia, and did not push either its NATO allies or the United Nations to help. The Czechoslovak crisis quickly faded from the world stage, but the lessons regarding America's actions, or lack thereof, were clear. The White House demonstrated that it was willing to abandon many of the country's morals and principles, and seek the path of acquiescence, nonresistance and reticence. The result was that the United States failed to act in a way that most felt was appropriate, damaging the country's desire for a reputation as a steadfast defender of democracy.

## **U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY UP TO LYNDON JOHNSON**

In order to understand how the United States' reaction to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 could be considered deficient, one must examine America's early Cold War policies and rhetoric as they related to democracy in Eastern Europe.

America lost much of its influence in Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union during and following World War II, but it nonetheless ardently continued to uphold a doctrine that advocated social and political freedom, and liberal democracy. Clearly geared towards countering both the threats of fascism and communism, American policy maintained strong democratic principles. Before the United States formally entered WWII, the country made clear its position in the Atlantic Charter in August of 1941. Towards the end of the conflict, the United States worked to include the Declaration of Liberated Europe into the proceedings of the 1945 Yalta Conference. Even after Eastern Europe had become a bastion of Soviet influence, the United States clung to its rhetoric about liberalism and freedom, and made these positions in the peace treaties that it signed in February of 1947 with Romania and Bulgaria. Several presidential doctrines, speeches by politicians, formal policy decrees, and actual physical actions made clear the United States' level of commitment to its stated ideals of liberal democracy. This helped create an important precedent for words and actions that would, in 1956 and 1968, become obvious not because of its continuance, but because of its absence.

The Atlantic Charter, declared in August of 1941, was an agreement between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill that set forth the basic principles that the two parties agreed would guide their foreign policies. The United States illustrated its early commitment to the freedom of Europe by stating in the Charter's third point that U.S. policy would ensure "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live." The third point also emphasized the importance of "sovereign rights and self government," and of the restoration of those things "to those who have been forcibly deprived of them." Additionally, the Atlantic

Charter's sixth point stated that it was the desire of the United States to see that "all nations [have] the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and... that all the men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom."<sup>1</sup> By taking such a stance, the Atlantic Charter laid the foundation for future agreements and protocols, and served to solidify the position of the United States vis-à-vis Europe.

Another significant example of America's commitment to liberty in Europe came in February of 1945 during the Yalta Conference. However, even prior to that, Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius in November of 1944 again reiterated the United States' position on the future of Europe, and Eastern Europe in particular, when he told President Roosevelt that political, social, economic, and cultural concerns were of primary importance.<sup>2</sup> Cognizant of this fact, Roosevelt entered Yalta, and left with a "Declaration on Liberated Europe." This declaration, similar to the Atlantic Charter, clearly emphasized American commitment to freedom. It stated that Europe's newly liberated nations would be able "to create democratic institutions of their own choice" and restore their sovereign rights. Furthermore, it committed the Allies to (a) establish conditions of internal peace, (b) provide emergency relief, (c) form interim governments pledged to the ideal of free elections, and (d) if necessary, help facilitate such elections.<sup>3</sup> Thus, one of the results of the Yalta Conference was not only a reaffirmed and re-strengthened American commitment to the democratic future of Eastern Europe, but an actual indication that, if necessary, direct action may be taken to ensure a free and liberated Europe.

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1. The Avalon Project, "Atlantic Charter," Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp> (accessed April 6, 2010).

2. Bennett Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 14-15.

3. The Avalon Project, "The Yalta Conference," Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp> (accessed April 6, 2010).

The terms of the formal peace treaties with Romania and Bulgaria, both of which were ratified on February 10, 1947, are some of the last examples of American commitment to freedom in Eastern Europe during the period immediately following World War II. Part II, Section I, Article II, of the peace treaty with Bulgaria stipulated that the country “shall take all measures necessary to secure to all persons... fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, of press and publication, of religious worship, of political opinion and of public meeting.”<sup>4</sup> Part II, Section I, Article III, of the peace treaty between the United States and Romania required the same thing, in addition to the assurances of the rights of Romania’s minorities.<sup>5</sup> The American insistence upon such wording, and the fact that it was placed very early on in the treaties, implies that even after the Iron Curtain had fallen on Eastern Europe, the United States, at least rhetorically, remained committed to upholding the principles of freedom and democracy. In fact, the United States would not even consider ratifying the treaties unless the two countries held free elections. As a result, American policy and rhetoric during the years surrounding World War II helped to establish the precedent of a determined commitment to Eastern Europe’s freedom. However, the postwar period demonstrated the limits of American power. Ironically, it was in Romania and Bulgaria that the United States proved that it was not ready to intervene on behalf of freedom and justice. U.S. support for anti-communist leaders led to their arrest, show trials, and (in Bulgaria) execution. The U.S. government remained silent during these actions. This sad instance of abandonment clearly illustrated a disconnect between the United States’ rhetoric and

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4. The Avalon Project, “Treaty of Peace with Bulgaria: 10 February 1947,” Yale Law School, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/usmu012.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu012.asp) (accessed April 6, 2010).

5. The Avalon Project, “Treaty of Peace with Romania: 10 February 1947,” Yale Law School, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/usmu011.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu011.asp) (accessed April 6, 2010).

actions, and that a shameful “failure of nerve” had occurred in Washington.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the government retained its overall commitment to the liberty of Eastern Europe, and made clear that this commitment would not end after the post-war settlements. Rather, it would continue to be a major component of American diplomacy and propagate itself in doctrines, speeches, policies, and actions over the coming years and even decades.

The U.S. government repeatedly expressed, both in the tenets of formal doctrines, and in general speeches, its commitment to the independence of the Eastern Europeans. For example, the Truman Doctrine in 1947 made clear that the strategy of the United States was to “support free peoples who are resisting... subjugation.” Furthermore, the doctrine said that it would be official policy to assist “peoples [in working] out their own destinies in their own way,” and that this was important, because it was “the free peoples of the world [who] look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.”<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State George C. Marshall’s speech at Harvard in 1947 contained not only promises of economic assistance to Europe, but also a stern message to those who would “perpetuate human misery... politically or otherwise,” warning that they would “encounter the opposition of the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1951, a Republican congressional representative from Wisconsin exclaimed, “we will do everything we can to work for [Eastern Europe’s] eventual liberation,”

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6. Joseph Rothschild and Nancy M. Wingfield, *Return to Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113, 118.

7. The Avalon Project, “Truman Doctrine.” Yale Law School, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp) (accessed April 8, 2010).

8. USAID, “Marshall Plan.” <http://www.usaid.gov/multimedia/video/marshall/marshallspeech.html> (accessed April 11, 2010).

including “actually assist[ing]” with it.<sup>9</sup> General Dwight D. Eisenhower espoused similar rhetoric as well, during his presidential campaign in 1952, when he advocated a “more dynamic foreign policy which... will endeavor to bring about the liberation of the enslaved peoples” of Eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup> In the sixth point of Eisenhower’s January 5, 1957 speech to Congress that would become the basis for his doctrine, he said that “political independence” of nations must be protected, while later affirming yet again that the United States must make manifest its commitment to the “support of freedom,” and “independence of every nation.”<sup>11</sup> Even years later, President John F. Kennedy pledged in his inaugural address “to assure the survival and the success of liberty,” and to be responsible for “defending freedom.”<sup>12</sup> These repeated and vociferous comments about freedom, liberty, and the support of the United States government in pursuing such goals, clearly demonstrated—at the very least verbally and symbolically—a commitment by America not to stand idly by when freedom and self-determination was threatened. As it actually turns out, often times such rhetoric did become policy and the U.S. took actions to support and defend freedom in Eastern Europe.

One of the earliest post-war examples of U.S. assistance to anti-communist forces fighting for freedom came in the form of economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey in 1947. Although these countries were not yet under Soviet control, and were within the Western sphere of influence as prescribed by the Percentage Agreement, the Truman administration nonetheless decided to reinforce its words with actions, and bolstered

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9. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Mutual Security Program: Hearings*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1951, pp.1106-9, as quoted in Kovrig, 46.

10. "Liberation Pledge Affirmed by G.O.P." *New York Times*, October 5, 1952, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed April 9, 2010).

11. The Modern History Sourcebook, “Eisenhower Doctrine,” Fordham University, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1957eisenhowerdoctrine.html> (accessed April 8, 2010).

12. The Avalon Project, “Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy,” Yale Law School, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/kennedy.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp) (accessed April 8, 2010).



those two countries' democratic regimes.<sup>13</sup> Such action demonstrated that the United States was capable of, and prepared to, assist friendly forces at least in communist-threatened, if not communist-controlled states. Because the support for Greece and Turkey proved to be an important early success, it would serve as a basis for future strategies and policies, many of which would help to define the United States' diplomacy towards Eastern Europe in the following decade.

Soon after the Greek and Turkish assistance programs, American rhetoric found its way into official policy recommendations, demonstrating that there could be an explicit link between rhetoric and action. In March of 1948, the National Security Council (NSC) urged the U.S. to “develop and... carry out a coordinated campaign to support underground resistance movements in countries behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in August of that year, the government elaborated upon its aims to include the reduction of Soviet power and influence from the satellite countries either by direct or indirect activity, or by challenging Soviet prestige.<sup>15</sup> By December of 1949, the National Security Council had gone as far as suggesting that the United States “do what it can... particularly through covert operations and propaganda, to keep alive the anti-communist sentiment... in the satellite countries.”<sup>16</sup>

Often, such recommendations proved not to be mere aggrandizement. In June of 1948, the Central Intelligence Agency established the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) to carry out “propaganda, [and] economic warfare; preventive direct action,

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13. Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 28.

14. NSC 7, “The Position of the United States with Respect to Soviet-Directed World Communism,” March 30, 1948, as quoted in Kovrig, 32.

15. Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 32

16. NSC 58/2, “United States Policy Toward the satellite states in Eastern Europe,” December 8, 1949, as quoted in Kovrig, 33.

including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerillas, and refugee liberation groups.” The only stipulation attached to such actions was that the government be able to “plausibly disclaim” any responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Notable OPC actions included airdrops of arms, radios, and money into Poland, the military recruitment and training of Eastern European émigrés, and a (failed) five-year long attempt to instigate revolution in Albania. Although the CIA and OPC never achieved regime change, they did manage to partially infiltrate the Iron Curtain and carry out actions intended to maintain the Western sympathies of many of those living in communist countries. These attempts, along with psychological, informational, and non-traditional forms of warfare, were marginally successful, showing that the prospects of American assistance remained present.<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1950s, the American government was still pursuing a policy of rollback, and trying to undermine communist regimes wherever possible. To do this more effectively, the country began to utilize non-traditional forms of warfare, which included the use of propaganda. Certainly, one of the largest, most influential, and most well-known components of American propaganda warfare during the Cold War was Radio Free Europe (RFE). Although many of the contemporary RFE sources are biased and triumphalist, they nonetheless provide valuable stories and insights into the organization’s activities. Beginning in the early 1950s, the radio’s mission was to inform Eastern European listeners about events and issues not covered by their communist-run media outlets, and ultimately to bring about the liberation of Eastern Europe by enabling

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17. NSC 10/2, “Office of Special Operations,” June 18, 1948, as quoted in Kovrig, 39.

18. Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 43-45.

the demise of the communist system.<sup>19</sup> Funded by the Central Intelligence Agency with much of its programming dictated to it by the State Department, RFE and its affiliates engaged in a number of subversive actions. Frequently, the intent of these actions was to disrupt communist regimes and foster discontent among the civilian populations living behind the Iron Curtain. Czechoslovakia, for both political and geographic reasons, was many times a primary target for RFE, and experienced a great deal of attention.

Perhaps surprisingly, Radio Free Europe did not carry out many of its earliest and most prominent activities over the airways. Instead, RFE along with two sister organizations, the Free Europe Press and the Crusade for Freedom, organized an ambitious project that utilized large weather balloons to drop leaflets deep inside the Iron Curtain. Czechoslovakia was the primary target, due to its geographical location. Between 1951 and 1956, hundreds of thousands of these balloons “flew” towards Czechoslovakia “carrying messages of freedom” and insulting communist leaders. Intended to amount to “a psychological warfare action program,” these operations also had the goal of “coordinating and inspiring popular opposition to communism.” The balloons were ignored at first by the authorities, but when the messages become more aggressive in nature, anger amongst the communist leaders grew. The Czechoslovak government dispatched MiG fighter jets to shoot down as many of the balloons as possible, and ordered anti-aircraft artillery to fire on them as well. Police did their best to confiscate any leaflets that made it through, and the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry issued formal complaints to the U.S. Department of State.<sup>20</sup> In light of the perceived positive effects of the balloon operations, RFE and its affiliates began to change their

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19. Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), ix.

20. *Ibid.*, 61-64.

message and become more assertive. Operation Veto in 1954 was an instance of direct political action in which RFE attempted to influence the Czechoslovak elections occurring at that time. The operation heavily emphasized the motto of “liberation through liberalization,” and by speaking as the “voice of the opposition,” Radio Free Europe attempted to involve itself directly in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia and create tangible change from within.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the balloon program was abandoned. Fears of disrupting commercial airplanes, the program’s rising costs, and most importantly, a feeling among the RFE leadership that the balloons were detracting from the main broadcasting goals of the station, led to their retirement.<sup>22</sup> Although now solely a broadcasting entity, Radio Free Europe’s balloon operations were significant examples of the United States’ government’s continued policies of actively trying to provoke change in Eastern Europe, and constituted a continued adherence to America’s previous efforts and tactics at supporting Eastern European dissidents.

In the years leading up to the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, the radio’s Czechoslovak branch attempted to serve as “propaganda” directed at “common people, intellectuals, and party members.” Closely monitored by the State Department, RFE acted as the official voice for government-sanctioned content. However, that did not mean that such content was lacking in pro-democracy and pro-freedom rhetoric. American policy and guidance for the Czechoslovak branch in the 1950s and early 1960s encouraged broadcasts that promoted “freedom from communism.” Furthermore, the radio aired programs meant to “foster... revolutionary development[s] resulting in... the attainment of national independence.” It is important to note, however, that the

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21. Allan A. Michie, *Voices Through the Iron Curtain: The Radio Free Europe Story* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1963), 135-136, 144.

22. Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 72.

government supporters of the radio were very careful to ensure that the émigré and individual interests of the actual broadcasters did not hijack the programming.<sup>23</sup> Because many broadcasters were political or cultural exiles, the government needed to make sure that the radios represented its views, and not theirs. Given that regard, the radio's programming was probably more conservative and cautiously laid back than it would have otherwise been, preventing an even stronger display of support for democracy.

Nonetheless, as late as 1965, and even after President Johnson's efforts to tone down American rhetoric in favor of promoting détente and closer U.S.-Soviet ties, Radio Free Europe still set forth a broadcast strategy that emphasized "a total transition to democracy," and the "growth of reform sentiment" within the Czechoslovak Communist Party.<sup>24</sup> Like the previous examples of U.S. support for democracy and freedom in Eastern Europe, Radio Free Europe served as a tool for that end. Secretly funded for much of its history by the CIA, the radio was a release for American propaganda and rhetoric. Acting as a continuous example of America's efforts to support change in communist countries, RFE in many ways epitomized American rhetorical and moral support for anti-communists, in addition to acting as an important medium of cultural and informational exchange.

However, the 1950s was not a period marked by unwavering support for Eastern European dissenters. The U.S. government again confirmed that despite a strong rhetorical commitment to democracy, it at times avoided firm action. Just as the U.S. abandoned Romanian and Bulgarian leaders following the ratification of the peace treaties, so too did it largely abandon the Hungarians in October of 1956. Displaying an

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23. Ibid., 118-120.

24. Ibid., 146.

inconsistency that would manifest itself again later in 1968, the State Department, White House, and CIA encouraged and “kept alive the yearning for freedom” in Hungary until the Soviet army intervened, at which point the U.S. was, in the words of Allen Dulles, “caught napping and doing nothing.”<sup>25</sup> Because such inaction was so contrary to what the U.S. had been saying, both directly by politicians, and indirectly through organs such as RFE, and because the U.S. failed to respond in what many hoped would be a constructive manner, “a barrage of criticism” was leveled upon the government. Such criticism forced not only internal reviews and investigations of the conduct of agencies such as the State Department, RFE, and CIA, but substantive policy revisions that in the years to come would reframe the perspective through which the United States acted with regard to promoting liberation in Eastern Europe. Although policies and actions would become less overt and confrontational in the hopes of avoiding a repeat of the violence that struck Hungary, unfortunately, that country was not the last example of a disconnect between what the U.S. government promised versus what it actually delivered.<sup>26</sup>

Czechoslovakia in 1968 would face many of the same discontinuities of policy and action, and like Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, it faced abandonment and the harsh realization that pro-democracy rhetoric and actions did not translate into tangible American support when it was needed.

## **LYNDON JOHNSON’S POLICIES TOWARDS EASTERN EUROPE**

After Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the office of President of the United States in 1963, the country accelerated a shift in its policies and priorities for Eastern Europe

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25. Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 89-90.

26. *Ibid.*, 101-102.

that began after Hungary's 1956 revolution. Johnson continued to provide cultural and political support for the region, but hastened the shift of American policy away from much of the bellicosity of previous administrations. The President began to guide the country down a path that he hoped would lead to détente and a warming of relations between the United States and the communist countries of Europe. Because his "goal in Europe and elsewhere [was] a just and secure peace," Johnson tried to alleviate much of the tension and mistrust that existed between the two blocks.<sup>27</sup> However, this trend did not mean that he and the United States abandoned efforts at undermining communism or spreading democracy and freedom. Such support and rhetoric still existed, albeit in a more veiled and less overt manner. Instead of ordering the CIA to airdrop weapons behind the Iron Curtain as previous administrations had done, Johnson initiated a program that he called bridge building. It was his hope that this program would not only bring about better East-West ties, but the eventual end of communist control as well.

Bridge building was largely a product of the revised approach to Eastern Europe that the United States was forced to take following the Soviet repression of Hungary's 1956 revolution. The United States revamped its foreign policies and their methods of implementation after that revolution because many accused the United States of being "paralyzed by inaction," and of having "misrepresent[ed] its commitment to rollback" and the freedom of Eastern Europe.<sup>28</sup> Realizing the danger of encouraging but then not actually assisting or supporting reformers, America began to focus on the promotion of liberalization within communist countries, as opposed to violent revolution or covert

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27. "Making Europe Whole: An Unfinished Task," (address given by President Johnson October 7, 1966) U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin*, October 24, 1966, 625, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/dsbul55&id=1&size=2&collection=journals&index=journals/dsbul#624> (accessed March 12, 2010).

28. Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 101-105.

activities. Engagement, economic and cultural outreach, and geopolitics replaced CIA-sponsored attempts at revolution. However, the United States remained “doctrinally unwilling to accept the permanence of Soviet rule over Eastern Europe.”<sup>29</sup> In both its rhetoric and actions, the U.S. continued to “assure the satellite peoples of the continuing interest of the United States in the... restoration of their independence and political freedom.”<sup>30</sup> Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State for both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, reiterated in 1963 that “we would like to do what we can to encourage [nationalism, reform, and freedom] within the communist world.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the notion of a formalized bridge building came about in May 1964 during a speech given by President Johnson in Lexington, Virginia. During that address, the President declared that the United States would “build bridges across the Gulf which has divided us from Eastern Europe,” and that they would be “bridges of increased trade, of ideas, of visitors and of humanitarian aid.”<sup>32</sup> President Johnson hoped that this initiative would not only “open avenues of political, economic, and cultural contact with Eastern Europe,” but that bridge building in the long-run might even undermine communist ideology and authority.<sup>33</sup> National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 304 in June of 1964 ordered the State Department to transform these “recommendations [of] statement of policy into specific

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29. Ibid.

30. NSC 5707/8, “Basic National Security Policy,” June 3, 1957, as quoted in Kovrig, 105.

31. Department of State, *Bulletin*, October 28, 1963, 656-657.

32. “National Security Action Memorandum No. 304,” June 3, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter cited as *FRUS*), vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 4.

33. Frank Costigliola, “LBJ, Germany, and ‘the End of the Cold War,’” in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968*, ed. Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 193.



action programs,” to be implemented in Czechoslovakia and other countries.<sup>34</sup> As understood by the Department of State:

[The United States’] basic purpose in building bridges to East Europe is to facilitate and sustain... (1) internal liberalization; (2) establishment of a certain degree of national independence from Soviet control; (3) pragmatic innovations designed to cope with pressing economic problems; and (4) progress in reassociation with the West... We seek thereby progress toward the realization of our ultimate objective in East Europe, that is: the establishment of conditions under which the people of each country may determine its own society; and where each country may enjoy national independence, security, and a normal relationship with all other countries. This will mean the final dismantling of the Iron Curtain and the free association of East Europe and the West.<sup>35</sup>

NSAM 352, and many of the President’s speeches, reconfirmed bridge building, and by the summer of 1966, it was well underway.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is clear that the President’s policy did not aim to abandon its support for Eastern Europeans. Rather, it simply devised a new way in which to carry out its objectives, albeit one differing in notable ways from past policies.

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34. “National Security Action Memorandum No. 304.”

35. “Paper Prepared in the Department of State,” undated, *FRUS*, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 12.

36. Thomas A. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 210.

Although bridge building encompassed all the Eastern European communist states, including the Soviet Union, a significant portion of its resources directly targeted Czechoslovakia. It was in the implementation of these components that a continuity, albeit somewhat altered one, from the previous actions of the past twenty years emerged. With bridge building, the United States' officials were not as explicitly promoting radical reform or revolution as they did in the late 1940s and early 1950s, nor were they taking the same approach that Radio Free Europe often took in promoting freedom. However, the United States government clearly continued its involvement with Czechoslovak society, and still agitated for change. Even with the more placatory bridge building, the administration was still lending its support to reformers, and still very much involved with the actions and consequences of events in Czechoslovakia.

Because Czechoslovakia was “one of [the] more attractive opportunities” for bridge building, the Department of State began early on to implement its outreach program there. Some of the earliest Czechoslovak initiatives came in 1964, and concerned increasing economic and financial agreements that would allow for more trade and cultural exchange, along with the negotiation of a new consular convention that would permit the Czechoslovaks to expand their diplomatic presence in the United States.<sup>37</sup> By December of that year, concrete examples of the effects of bridge building had emerged. The Czechoslovak State Airline, *Československé Aerolinea* had inquired about leasing Boeing 707, DC-8, and DC-9 aircraft from the United States, as opposed to purchasing Soviet-made *Ilyushin* IL-62s. U.S. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia Jacob Beam urged approval of the deal, as did members of the State Department, given its

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37. “Paper Prepared in the Department of State” undated, *FRUS*, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 12.

ideological significance.<sup>38</sup> Such instances of communist outreach demonstrated the potential success of bridge building in undermining the Soviet's grip upon the region, and led to the furthering and intensification of the process.

Soon after this initial outreach, cultural exchange began to take place as well. In 1965, the American poet Allen Ginsberg, was embraced by Czechoslovak students, and elected king of their annual *Majáles* student festival—a significant occurrence demonstrating the affability of many Czechoslovaks to America and American culture.<sup>39</sup> An escalation of such sentiment seemingly occurred as well, as Prague theaters began to produce works by Western authors, cross-cultural censorship was eased, American professors and academics were invited to Czechoslovakia to give lectures, and tourism both to and from the West greatly increased.<sup>40</sup> Two prominent American economists, Gregory Grossman from the University of California and Dean William from Cornell University, visited Czechoslovakia and shared ideas with their Czechoslovak counterparts.<sup>41</sup> Yet another instance of cultural exchange took place in the early summer of 1968 when the U.S. Department of Commerce hosted a management-marketing seminar for 200 Czechoslovaks to “compare American management methods with the workers councils concept.” As it turned out, the Czechoslovak's views “closely paralleled those of American businessmen.”<sup>42</sup> Further signs of improving cultural

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38. Kenneth N. Skoug, Jr., *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969* (London: Praeger, 1999), 12-13.

39. H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 72.

40. Mitchell Lerner, “Trying to Find the Guy Who Invited Them: Lyndon Johnson, Bridge Building, and the End of the Prague Spring,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 32, No. 1 (2007): 89.

41. Skoug, *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*, 34.

42. *Ibid.*, 99.

relations emerged when Washington allowed Czechoslovakia to open a consulate and commercial office in New York, and engage in more cultural outreach activities.<sup>43</sup>

Bridge building also helped to influence economic issues as well. In 1967, the Czechoslovak government turned to the United States and the Export-Import Bank as a means of obtaining capital.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, talks over a longstanding dispute concerning the return of Czechoslovak gold seized by the Nazis and then captured by the United States at the end of World War II showed signs of improving. April of 1968 witnessed renewed efforts by both sides to resolve the issue, with Ambassador Beam even willing to accept the Czechoslovak terms. Although the two sides nearly reached a settlement, the fact that any agreement would require Congressional approval eventually forestalled any rapprochement. Moreover, the U.S. Congress proved to be a stumbling block regarding the White House's proposed granting of "most favored nation" (MFN) status to Czechoslovakia. MFN would have allowed for much freer trade between the two countries, and it would have eliminated U.S. imposed import tariffs on Czechoslovak goods. Again, Ambassador Beam and other officials urged that Czechoslovakia be granted this status, especially since countries like Poland and Romania enjoyed it, but ultimately to no avail (Congress was unwilling at that point to make concessions without the promise of tangible gains). The United States did however make one significant economic concession. In June of 1968, the Department of the Treasury removed Czechoslovakia from its "Circular 665" listing. This action released \$5 million worth of benefits payments to former American citizens who immigrated to, and were now living

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43. Ibid., 32

44. Lerner, "Trying to Find the Guy Who Invited Them: Lyndon Johnson, Bridge Building, and the End of the Prague Spring," 89

in Czechoslovakia, and helped improve the prospects for future economic agreements.<sup>45</sup> These economic achievements, along with the other cultural contacts and exchanges, demonstrated that ties to and support for Czechoslovakia could bring about important gains in these fields. Furthermore, an enhanced political rapprochement had the possibility of progressing détente, and even helping to undermine Soviet control.

Although bridge building signified a new approach in America's outreach and treatment of the Eastern European countries, the United States was still ideologically, doctrinally, and diplomatically committed to undermining communism. President Johnson adopted largely non-political avenues of resistance, but overall, the United States only modified, not discontinued, its earlier practices and policies. In Czechoslovakia especially, the American actions were prominent and often times highly visible. The continuity of American support and rhetoric was evident and clearly established. It was only well into 1968, and on the eve of the Warsaw Pact invasion, that all of this changed.

## **THE INVASION AND THE WHITE HOUSE**

The end of 1967 and beginning of 1968 was a very tumultuous time for the people of Czechoslovakia. Alexander Dubček was the new head of the Communist Party, and soon began instituting liberal reforms dubbed as “socialism with a human face.” Although the White House was aware of these developments, it decided not to involve itself. At this point, President Johnson was late in his final term, and beginning to work fervently towards détente. He was very concerned about not angering or alienating the Soviets. Secretary of State Rusk agreed, thinking it best not to do anything to jeopardize the President's foreign policy goals. Therefore, they decided not to “tinker with [the

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45. Skoug, *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*, 31, 93-94.

Czechoslovak developments] in any way.” Rusk later elaborated by saying “This is a matter for the Czechs first and foremost. Apart from that, it is a matter for the Czechs and other nations of the Warsaw Pact.”<sup>46</sup> As a result, Washington ignored real democratic change in Czechoslovakia. This pre-invasion neglect by the White House is very significant. For the first time, Johnson demonstrated that his own political desires and goals were more important than continuing America’s precedent of support for democracy in Eastern Europe. The beginnings of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia ironically marked the beginnings of America’s inaction in the country. However, those inactions would not fully manifest themselves until after the Warsaw Pact occupied Czechoslovakia.

When the armies of the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Bulgaria invaded Czechoslovakia on the night of August 20, 1968, the event was, as Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, “like throwing a dead fish in the face of the President of the United States.”<sup>47</sup> The invasion took President Lyndon Johnson and much of his staff by surprise, and left them in a state of near paralysis. Although individuals within the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and other organizations had been warning about a possible invasion of Czechoslovakia, President Johnson largely ignored such predictions. Perhaps then, it was these overlooked warnings that first illustrated the failure of President Johnson’s response to the invasion.

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46. “Gunter Bischof, “‘No Action’: The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968,” in *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*, ed. Gunter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 217.

47. “Memorandum of Conversation,” September 20, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 14, *Soviet Union*, doc. 304.

Although the Warsaw Pact's actions on August 20 caught many in the Johnson administration off guard, there had been ample evidence, intelligence, and discussion to prove that this should not have been the case. As early as 1964, a national intelligence estimate from the CIA warned that "the Soviets would consider direct military intervention in Eastern Europe... when they believed vital Soviet interest to be threatened."<sup>48</sup> Years later, during the beginning of the Prague Spring, Deputy Under Secretary of State Charles Bohlen expressed concerns that the liberal reform in Czechoslovakia would go too far and provoke some kind of Soviet response. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford concurred, and raised the question as to whether a response by the Soviets would resort to the use of military force to quash Czechoslovak reforms.<sup>49</sup> Bohlen even authored a lengthy memo to Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach that discussed the prudence of contingency planning, and listed several possible courses of action to take should a military invasion occur. Although he advised that the government use "discretion" and quiet diplomacy so as not to upset the Soviets, he also advocated for the continuation of bridge building and the improvement of East-West relations with the hope that in doing so a conflict could be avoided.<sup>50</sup> In July 1968, as events progressed and became more serious, the CIA warned that the Soviet Union had deployed its armies to many of the Warsaw Pact countries bordering Czechoslovakia, and that "great pressures are being exerted... to prepare for an intervention."<sup>51</sup> NATO also

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48. "National Intelligence Estimate," July 22, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 7.

49. "Memorandum for the Record," April 24, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 20.

50. "Memorandum From the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Bohlen) to the Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach)," April 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 21.

51. "Preparations for Military Intervention in Czechoslovakia," July 26, 1968, *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Gale Cengage Learning, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio->

realized that there was a high probability the Soviets would invade, and began to discuss consequences and possible responses.<sup>52</sup> Even the American Ambassador in Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, warned of the Soviet military preparations, and the high likelihood of an invasion of Czechoslovakia.<sup>53</sup> However, aside from some very basic and preliminary contingency planning, the White House did not take firm action in response to these assessments. CIA director Richard Helms was so frustrated with the lackadaisical attitude taken by the President and his top advisors regarding preparing for, or even seriously considering the possibility of a Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, that he said his attempts at persuading them to take developments seriously “were as futile as (in his words) ‘peeing up a rope.’”<sup>54</sup>

By the time the President realized that he and his administration were underprepared to deal with an invasion of Czechoslovakia, Soviet tanks already occupied that country. August 20 may have started out as one of President Johnson’s happiest days—the next morning the United States and Soviet Union were going to announce the beginning of arms limitation talks, an accomplishment sure to be one of Johnson’s major détente successes—but the day ended on a devastating note.<sup>55</sup> Earlier that morning, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, received the text of a message from Moscow that announced and explained the Warsaw Pact invasion. Ordered to

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state.edu/servlet/DDRS?vrsn=1.0&view=image&locID=colu44332&c=23&page=1&img=.25&ste=6&n=100&docNum=CK2349099636&docID=265324 (accessed April 25, 2010).

52. “National Security Council Memorandum for Mr. Rostow,” August 15, 1968, *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Gale Cengage Learning, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/servlet/DDRS?vrsn=1.0&locID=colu44332&c=22&ste=6&n=100&docNum=CK2349510797&finalAuth=true> (accessed April 25, 2010).

53. Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 113.

54. E. H. Cookridge, *Gehlen: Spy of the Century* (New York: Random House, 1972), 361; Laqueur, *World of Secrets*, 134, 357 note 61, as quoted in Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges*, 114.

55. Lerner, “Trying to Find the Guy Who Invited Them: Lyndon Johnson, Bridge Building, and the End of the Prague Spring,” 77.



deliver the message to President Johnson between 6:00 PM and 8:00 PM, the ambassador contacted Walt Rostow, Johnson's National Security Advisor, and requested an audience with the President. At 8:00 PM Dobrynin entered the cabinet room of the White House to deliver his statement.<sup>56</sup> Although the Ambassador had made clear that the message was "urgent," and that Rostow thought (correctly) that it could very well be related to the situation in Czechoslovakia, Johnson remained unconcerned.<sup>57</sup> When the meeting began, Johnson started talking about a movie he had recently seen at his ranch in Texas. Soon after, the conversation shifted to of all things, President Johnson's haircut, his personal health, and to the fact that he "had to lose some weight." It was only after all of Johnson's banal small talk that Ambassador Dobrynin was actually able to get around to delivering his statement on the invasion. After reading the message about "rendering necessary assistance to the Czechoslovak people," and claiming that the Czechoslovak government had "invited" the Warsaw Pact forces, Dobrynin anxiously awaited Johnson's reply.<sup>58</sup> The ambassador recalled to his sheer amazement that:

President Johnson listened carefully, but apparently, he did not immediately appreciate the significance of the news. Much to my surprise he did not react to it at all, just thanked me for the information and said that he would probably discuss the statement with Rusk and others the next morning and give us a reply, if need be.... He proceeded to another

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56. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Random House, 1995), 179-180.

57. John Prados, "Prague Spring and SALT: Arms Limitation Setbacks in 1968," in *The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson: Beyond Vietnam*, ed. H. W. Brands (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 30-31.

58. "Summary of Meeting," August 20, 1968, 8:15-8:42 P.M., *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 80.

subject, on which he seemed much keener. He said he was awaiting our response to his plans to announce his visit to the Soviet Union.... Still utterly oblivious of the impact of what was happening in Prague, Johnson asked us to give him a reply about his visit to Moscow in time for the next morning's meetings... Johnson then reverted to his [earlier small talk]... offered me a whisky... and began to tell me various entertaining stories about Texas.<sup>59</sup>

Ironically, it was Rostow, the only other person present during the conversation, who showed any emotion. Dobrynin recalled that his facial expression grew solemn, and that he lowered his head. Contrary to Johnson, Rostow did not remain as friendly and genial, and no doubt understood, (or at least showed that he understood), the seriousness and grave implications of the Soviet decision to invade.<sup>60</sup>

A hastily assembled National Security Council meeting held late at night on August 20, 1968 reinforced the fact that the invasion caught President Johnson and many of his staff off guard. Secretary of State Rusk opened the meeting by bluntly saying, "This surprises me." Both Secretary Clark and General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concurred. When President Johnson finally spoke, he stated that the purpose of the meeting was to "determine what our national interest is," and to give thought to the timing of any meetings with the Soviet leadership. Johnson was seemingly not concerned with bridge building anymore. Instead, the President was worried about saving face and achieving his nuclear arms summit. Secretary Rusk approved, and

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59. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 180-181.

60. Ibid.

implied that the whole event was really not that significant, when he said that the United States should “not move ahead in the next day or so” with any concrete actions in response to the assault on Czechoslovakia.<sup>61</sup>

Secretary Rusk did however move forward that night with a response to Ambassador Dobrynin. The Ambassador recalled that Rusk remained calm and composed as he read a message that called into question the feasibility of a summit in light of the invasion. What struck Dobrynin most though was Johnson’s almost foolish insistence and hope for a summit meeting (eventual if not immediate) in Moscow.<sup>62</sup> This singular focus on the part of the President of the United States really emphasized where his priorities stood. The Politburo hardly expected Johnson to react so nonchalantly, and it certainly did not expect that the President would continue to push for a summit.<sup>63</sup> Instead of immediately condemning the invasion, as expected, the American leadership seemed confused and dazed, especially within the first 24 hours after receiving word of the Warsaw Pact’s moves. More forceful rhetoric would soon be forthcoming, but the United States’, or at least the President’s, initial detached reactions and views on August 20 to the invasion would largely remained unchanged.

Even though President Johnson began August 21 with a somewhat more determined attitude than he exhibited twelve hours ago, he did not do much about the previous day’s events. Early in the morning, the President made important telephone calls to governmental officials, and worked on a statement that he delivered to the nation

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61. “Notes of Emergency Meeting of the National Security Council,” August 20, 1968, 10:15 PM, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 81.

62. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 181.

63. *Ibid.*

later in the day.<sup>64</sup> In it, he condemned the invasion, called for UN action, and requested a full withdrawal of the occupying forces.<sup>65</sup> Secretary Rusk held a news conference that day as well. He reiterated many of the President's points, calling for "reason," "responsibility," and "hope." He also made clear that the United States felt the situation was not "a direct responsibility of [theirs]," and that they had no "commitments to Czechoslovakia."<sup>66</sup> Here again, evidence of a disconnect between the past rhetoric and actions towards Czechoslovakia, and what emerged after the invasion can be seen clearly. The U.S. ignored the principles of many of the presidential doctrines, and of the actions of institutions such as Radio Free Europe. Although it is certainly true that the United States had no formal treaty obligations with Czechoslovakia, the U.S. had made commitments and invested resources in the country in the form of Radio Free Europe, bridge building, and the general attitudes and actions of past administrations, including the Johnson administration. The administration however was now definitely downplaying the significance of the invasion, and seemingly writing off Czechoslovakia to facilitate Johnson's attempts to convene a summit with Soviet leaders. Especially Johnson and Rusk's rhetoric and actions in the days to come would largely mirror such sentiments and continue to be reminiscent of the White House's initial reactions.

The following day, August 22, the President held a cabinet meeting to discuss the invasion. The meeting primarily was concerned with how the cabinet members should handle the press, and with what the implications of the invasion would be. However, the

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64. Gunter Bischof, "'No Action': The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968," 219.

65. "Statement by President Johnson," August 21, 1968, Department of State, *Bulletin*, 9 September 1968, 261.

66. "Secretary Rusk's News Conference," August 21, 1968, Department of State, *Bulletin*, 9 September 1968, 262.

President also illustrated his personal thinking on the events. He admitted that he had been disillusioned, if not outright deceived by the Soviets on notions of peace and cooperation. Johnson lamented the fact that “the cold war [was] not over,” and that communism had not somehow evolved from its earlier Stalinist convictions. Importantly, the President did signify that U.S.-Soviet relations, and particularly the nuclear arms summit meeting, were still of “mutual interest,” and implied that those interests were still quite important, and even the most important consideration when formulating a policy and response to the attack on Czechoslovakia.<sup>67</sup> Given the context of Vietnam and international tensions, his emphasis on such a policy was of the utmost importance. Thus, Johnson indicated that in order to keep alive the prospects of détente and a summit meeting, the United States would pursue a path that would not endanger those goals.

Another cabinet meeting on August 23 devoted part of its time to the Czechoslovak crisis. Much of the discussion centered on the effectiveness of the Warsaw Pact’s military maneuvers, and on the growing fear in the U.S. that the Soviet Union was actively working to substantially increase its military might. To counter such developments, General Wheeler suggested that President Johnson use the invasion as an excuse to maintain, if not increase, the U.S. military presence in Europe. One of the other major decisions to come out of this meeting was the assessment that “the most powerful weapon” to use against the Soviets would be a “highly mobilized and charged world reaction.” Secretary Rusk felt the Soviets were especially susceptible to propaganda and negative world opinion. George Ball, the U.S. Ambassador to the United

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67. “Minutes of Cabinet Meeting,” August 22, 1968, *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Gale Cengage Learning, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/servlet/DDRS?vrsn=1.0&view=image&locID=colu44332&c=1&page=1&img=.25&ste=6&n=100&docNum=CK2349143969&docID=272397> (accessed April 26, 2010).

Nations, agreed.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, given their proclivity for only UN action, the U.S. continued to pursue that path. The Johnson administration was determined not to undertake any other measures during its remaining few months that could jeopardize the President's hopes for continuing to push forward a policy of détente and reconciliation with the Soviet leaders.

### **THE RESPONSE BY NATO AND THE UN**

Johnson may have committed the country to taking action in the United Nations, but unfortunately, that did not ensure anything of substance would emerge. Furthermore, most people in his administration acknowledged this. Thus, it is either ironic or incredibly cynical that America voiced by far its harshest criticisms and condemnations of the invasion in this forum. Ambassador Ball delivered not one, but two statements before the UN on August 21, calling the invasion an “affront to all civilized sensibilities” and a direct violation of the United Nations’ Charter. He continued to say that the Soviet’s justification for the intervention was “an inept and obvious fraud,” and that the invasion must elicit “disgust and revulsion.” Ambassador Ball ended his first speech by calling upon the world to demand the immediate withdrawal of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces from Czechoslovakia.<sup>69</sup> In his statement later that same day, Ball glorified the modern history of Czechoslovakia, and emphasized its tendency and tenacity for democracy and survival. He continued to express vociferous support for the country and people of Czechoslovakia, and again urged that the UN work to “lift the dark shadow

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68. “Summary of Meeting,” August 23, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 85.

69. “Statements by Ambassador Ball in the UN Security Council: First Statement of August 21,” Department of State, *Bulletin*, 9 September 1968, 263-266.

now descended upon this small nation.”<sup>70</sup> The speech delivered on August 22 continued to denounce the Soviet Union for being “cynically engaged in the rape of [Czechoslovakia],” while on August 23, Ball lambasted the Soviet veto of a resolution condemning the invasion. Additionally that day, he suggested that UN Secretary-General U Thant create a special delegation to guarantee the safety and security of Czechoslovakia’s now imprisoned leaders.<sup>71</sup> However, even though the White House condemned the invasion in the UN, they knew that little if anything would come of it, largely because such rhetoric was acknowledged as cliché and purely political. Within such a large forum, Johnson felt that the risk of seriously upsetting the Soviets was minimal, and that since his administration did have to respond in some way, the UN would be the best place to do it.

Although the United Nations placed the invasion on its agenda, much like the White House predicted, the UN “did not take, or even consider, any... effective or forceful measures.” The Security Council met on August 21, and voted to discuss the issue (the Soviet Union and Hungary voted against the measure). Although ten countries, including the United States, voted in favor of a resolution that condemned the invasion as a violation of the UN Charter and called for a withdrawal of the occupying forces, the Soviets used their veto power and prevented the resolution’s adoption. The Canadians attempted to continue the debate however by introducing a new proposition requesting that the Secretary-General send a special envoy to Prague to assess the situation and

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70. “Ibid., 266-269.

71. “Statements by Ambassador Ball in the UN Security Council: Statement of August 22,” “Statements by Ambassador Ball in the UN Security Council: First Statement of August 23,” and “Statements by Ambassador Ball in the UN Security Council: Second Statement of August 23,” Department of State, *Bulletin*, 9 September 1968, 269-274.

ensure the safety and wellbeing of the Czechoslovak leadership. By this time though, the Soviets fully controlled the Czechoslovak leadership, which then proceeded to request that the UN dismiss the matter. No other resolutions or initiatives were put forth by any members of the UN, and within only a few days after the invasion, the subject was essentially dead.<sup>72</sup> By letting the debate terminate, the U.S. showed that although it was willing to engage in rhetoric (albeit superficially), it was not willing to act or take any measures that might harm relations, or jeopardize Johnson's overall goal of détente.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the other major international organization through which the United States could have acted, did even less than the United Nations. Although the invasion certainly sent "shivers" through Western Europe and NATO, they gave little response to the events of late August, in large part because they feared provoking a Soviet response.<sup>73</sup> Members of NATO cautiously condemned the assault on Czechoslovakia's sovereignty, but a West German request for an immediate NATO conference to discuss the matter went unfulfilled. In addition, NATO refused even to put its forces on alert.<sup>74</sup> There was a great fear among many in NATO and the diplomatic circles that any alliance response would be counterproductive because it could be seen as biased, inflammatory, and indicative of continuing cold war tensions. NATO wanted to minimize any chance of a confrontation with the Warsaw Pact, and so the alliance kept quiet.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, there was fear that NATO action might detract from the United Nation's response. The French Foreign Minister is reported to have said

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72. Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 756-758.

73. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam*, 219.

74. Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 755-756.

75. "NATO Reaction to Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia Discussed," September 1, 1968, *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Gale Cengage Learning, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/servlet/DDRS?vrsn=1.0&view=image&locID=colu44332&c=13&page=1&img=.25&ste=6&n=100&docNum=CK2349057758&docID=258278> (accessed April 27, 2010).



that there was no need for another “meaningless doctrine” that would only be a useless waste of time and effort.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the NATO alliance’s reaction to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia was minimal. Although there would be significant consequences for the structure and functioning of NATO in the future, in the immediate aftermath of Czechoslovakia’s occupation, the alliance remained tightlipped. A desire not to exacerbate the situation, but predominantly an overriding fear of antagonizing the Soviets, led to NATO’s acquiescence.

### **THE INVASION AND THE U.S. CONGRESS**

The White House, NATO, and the UN may have been halfhearted in their responses to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, but the U.S. Congress, and to a large extent the U.S. public, were not apathetic to Czechoslovakia’s plight. Many in the House of Representative and Senate vociferously denounced the Warsaw Pact’s move, and called on the President to respond in an assertive manner. The invasion consumed, at least for a few days, the U.S. media, which gave ample coverage to the events and served as a forum for voicing solidarity with the Czechoslovaks. The general population, and especially those of Czech, Slovak, or Eastern European descent, held rallies and demonstrations to voice their displeasure with the invasion and the U.S. response. Overall, the response by Congress and the media served as a glaring counter to President Johnson, and demonstrated that the White House did not necessarily undertake the policies that many in the country desired.

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76. “Memorandum From the Department of State Executive Secretary (Read) to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow),” August 23, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 86.

Early in the day on August 23, President Johnson met with about twenty congressional leaders to discuss the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Many in Congress used the invasion as a platform to appear staunchly anti-Soviet and to appeal to their constituents, and thus the meeting did not go well for the President, who was sharply chastised and given “a hard time” about his mild criticism of the Soviets and Warsaw Pact nations.<sup>77</sup> The congressional representatives wanted a much tougher response, and more forceful action. Two days later, there was another meeting with congressional leaders, and this time it was even more contentious. The legislative and executive branches were trying to coordinate and agree upon an appropriate course of action to take. Again, the Congress was much more bellicose than Johnson who, at one point, angrily and desperately exclaimed, “Are you suggesting that we send American troops there?” Both sides certainly realized that military intervention was out of the question, but such an outburst of emotion demonstrated the vast differences in opinion both sides held. The President was also probably tired, stressed, and upset about being put on the defensive.<sup>78</sup> It is important to remember, however, that there is no doubt that it was certainly easy for individual members of Congress to demand harsh action, especially since they were not the ones who would actually have to order it, or take the blame for a failure. Furthermore, with the presidential election just weeks away, there was certainly a great deal of political posturing. These considerations aside though, in the days and weeks following the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia, the Congress still passed numerous bills, resolutions, and pieces of legislation, and members continued to

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77. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 182.

78. *Ibid.*

demonstrate in both print and in person their disdain at the events occurring in Czechoslovakia.

H. Con. Res. 813 was one of the many resolutions put forth by the Congress that expressed outrage with the Warsaw Pact, and communicated concern for the wellbeing of the citizens of Czechoslovakia. Other resolutions, namely H. Res. 1290, H. Res. 1291, H. Res. 1292, H. Res. 1293, H. Res. 1294, and H. Res. 1296 all condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and sought the involvement of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.<sup>79</sup> One piece of legislation of particular significance though, was Senate Resolution 387. The introduction to this resolution denounced the “treacherous invasion,” lamented the loss of Czechoslovakia’s “brave new freedom” which had emerged out of its “totalitarian night,” and claimed that there was “no essential difference between the communism of Brezhnev and Kosygin and the communism of Joseph Stalin.” The individual articles of the resolution called for the administration to better “deal with the Czechoslovak crisis.” They also called for “the imposition of economic sanctions against the aggressor countries,” the removal of foreign soldiers from Czechoslovak territory, the establishment of a special United Nations committee to “gather information,” and the “immediate embargo” of all industrial and technological equipment bound for the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states that took part in the invasion. S. Res. 387 concluded by stating that the White House needed to demonstrate solidarity with the Czechoslovak people, and made clear that the Senate would support all the measures listed within the resolution.<sup>80</sup>

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79. U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record-Extensions of Remarks*, September 5, 1968, 25861, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140020&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#117>, (accessed February 19, 2010).

80. “Senate Resolution 387,” U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record-Senate*, September 5, 1968, 25757, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140020&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#13> (accessed February 19, 2010).

Thus, between the Congress' meetings with the President, and all of the resolutions and pieces of legislation that it passed, many of America's legislators made obvious their stance on the invasion of Czechoslovakia. They illustrated not only what they wanted done in response to it, but also how they felt about the Johnson administration's handling of matters.

In addition to passing resolutions, Congressional representatives voiced their frustration on the floors of the House and Senate. The Hon. Glenn Cunningham, a Republican from Nebraska, called Johnson's approach to the crisis "halfhearted," and complained that he was too focused on appeasing the Soviets and obtaining a summit meeting with them.<sup>81</sup> The Hon. Edward Derwinski (R-IL) stated that in his opinion the West was too defensive, and gave the Russians *carte blanche* to intervene in Czechoslovakia. He argued that there should have been some sort of gesture by the United States to deter the Soviets and make them think twice about the implications and consequences of an invasion on U.S.-Soviet relations.<sup>82</sup> However, not all members of Congress and political leaders held the same opinions. Gerald Ford, at that time the House Minority leader, referred to the events in Czechoslovakia as "a communist family struggle," and said, "We shouldn't get mixed up in [it]," out of a fear of Soviet reaction and potential diplomatic repercussions.<sup>83</sup> Even presidential-candidate Nixon said (albeit before the invasion), that caution and sensitivity were required when dealing with the

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81. "The Crisis in Eastern Europe," U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record-Extensions of Remarks*, September 26, 1968, 28809, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140022&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#562> (accessed February 19, 2010).

82. "Did Washington Acquiesce to Invasion of Czechoslovakia?," U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record-Extensions of Remarks*, September 26, 1968, 28535, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140022&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#287> (accessed February 19, 2010).

83. Alan Levy, *So Many Heroes*, (Sagaponack, NY: Second Chance Press, 1980), 257.

emerging Czechoslovak crisis, and that “saying anything would not be helpful.”<sup>84</sup>

However, many of Ford and Nixon’s contemporary politicians disagreed, at least publicly, and made their opinions known.

Some members of Congress did more than deliver speeches and help pass legislation. Many traveled to their home districts to garner popular support for Czechoslovakia and lead rallies and demonstrations. The Hon. William Minshall (R-OH) was in Cleveland on August 23, and helped lead a pro-Czechoslovak rally at that city’s Bohemian National Hall. Following his return to Washington, D.C. and Congress, he discussed his experiences with other members to gain yet more support.<sup>85</sup> The Hon. Roman Pucinski (D-IL) went to Chicago to address and help lead a rally there that was protesting the occupation of Czechoslovakia. Mr. Pucinski, in addition to harshly denouncing the aggressors and expressing solidarity and concern for the Czechs and Slovaks, also called upon the U.S. government to be “firm and resolute.” Furthermore, he specifically suggested that President Johnson suspend or greatly limit diplomatic and economic ties with the countries involved in the occupation. Economic sanctions, he contended, were powerful weapons.<sup>86</sup> Although these leaders’ actions could potentially be written off as mere politicking, the fact remains that overall, and even across both party lines, the response in the halls of Congress was forceful and vocal. It certainly may have been easier for someone without the responsibilities of the President or his top staff

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84. “Notes of Meeting,” August 10, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 78.

85. “Protest Rally Against Communist Invasion of Czechoslovakia,” U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record-Extensions of Remarks*, September 4, 1968, 25730, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140019&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#1366> (accessed February 19, 2010).

86. “The Remarks of Congressman Pucinski at Protest Rally,” U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record-Extensions of Remarks*, September 17, 1968, 27278-27279, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140021&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#186> (accessed February 19, 2010).

to be more aggressive and to take such a stance, but that does not mean that they had to do so. The fact that many did, helps clue us in to the overall mood of the country, a mood reinforced not only by Congress, but by the media and public as well.

## THE AMERICAN MEDIA RESPONSE

Once Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks and troops entered Czechoslovakia on August 20, the American media, predominantly the major newspapers, responded in an overwhelming manner. The events occurring in Czechoslovakia, for a short time at least, transfixed America's attention, and clearly elicited sympathy for the Czechs and Slovaks. Americans felt that at least before communism, Czechoslovakia embodied the same political values as the United States. Furthermore, the American public applauded the Prague Spring's transformations and liberalizations.<sup>87</sup> A study of the 1968 *New York Times* illustrated the extent to which the press was devoted to coverage of Czechoslovakia. More than 1200 articles over the course of the year were devoted to that country, with the majority coming in July, August, and September. Furthermore, an impressive 215 of those articles appeared on the front page of the newspaper. In other terms, averaged out over the course of the entire year, almost six out of ten *New York Times* front pages featured an article about Czechoslovakia. Although of all the major U.S. newspapers, the *New York Times* by far devoted the most coverage to Czechoslovakia, the *Wall Street Journal* had fifty page-one articles dealing with events in that country, and the *Christian Science Monitor* had sixty-one. Articles often dealt with the personalities of the leaders, and of the actual events of the invasion, but many times

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87. Gregory C. Ference, "Final Thoughts," in *The Portrayal of Czechoslovakia in the American Print Media, 1938-1989*, ed. Gregory C. Ference (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 141.

dealt with U.S. and world reaction.<sup>88</sup> For instance, the *New York Times* ran articles with titles such as “The U.S. Stays on Its Side of the Line.”<sup>89</sup> The *Washington Post* displayed displeasure with the course of events as well, with an article titled, “For Lack of Good Will,” that argued against showing “good will” towards the Soviets in light of the invasion.<sup>90</sup> In addition to stories, the newspapers had letters and editorials as well. Occasionally the letters defended President Johnson’s response, but more often than not, they mirrored the overall tone of the newspapers, and criticized the way that the United States handled the situation.

The *New York Times* was a primary location for many of these editorials. It often contained very inflammatory rhetoric, and helped to serve as an outlet for the (liberal) public’s emotion. “Russians, Go Home!” appeared in the *New York Times* on August 22, and attacked not only the “illegal and immoral conquest of Czechoslovakia,” but also “weak and inadequate reactions.” It went on to chastise the President for waiting too long to address the nation after the invasion, and for not taking quicker action in the United Nations.<sup>91</sup> “How Could They Do It?” appeared in the *Washington Post*. It discussed the displeasure of the Czech-American community to the White House’s response to the invasion.<sup>92</sup> Editorials and letters are by their very nature judgmental, biased, and often times politically charged, but because such a significant majority sympathized with the Czechoslovaks and voiced displeasure with the White House’s response, it is not inappropriate to use them to judge to a certain degree the general

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88. James W. Peterson, “American Newspaper Media Portrayal of the 1968 Prague Spring,” in *The Portrayal of Czechoslovakia in the American Print Media, 1938-1989*, ed. Gregory C. Ference (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 80-81.

89. Max Frankel, “The U.S. Stays on Its Side of the Line,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1968.

90. “For Lack of Good Will,” *Washington Post*, September 8, 1968.

91. “Russians, Go Home!” *New York Times*, August 22, 1968.

92. George Landover and Nicholas Von Hoffman, “How Could They Do It?,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 1968.

attitude of the American population. Public opinion managed to exhibit itself in other mediums too. Political cartoons and caricatures also voiced frustration and displeasure with the course of events, and often conveyed just as powerful a message as did articles and editorials.

Many of the political cartoons that emerged during the Czechoslovak crisis portrayed the Czechs and Slovaks as helpless victims caught up in the larger power struggles and politics of the Cold War, and in the course of a tragic history often repeated. The *Chicago Sun Times* published a cartoon depicting a small solitary figure trying to stop a tank with the Soviet flag painted on the side right next to a Nazi flag. The tank had already crushed several people. The caption reads, “Invasion of Czechoslovakia II,” thus comparing the Soviet invasion to the Nazi invasion in 1938.<sup>93</sup> Another cartoon that appeared in the *Washington Post* depicted a savage Russian soldier trampling the body of a figure representing Czechoslovakia while Hitler and Stalin look on approvingly.<sup>94</sup> Other cartoons focused more on the diplomatic and political repercussions of the invasion. Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* featured a cartoon on August 22 that portrayed the Soviets as the traditional and symbolic Russian bear. The bear was rabid, and clutched a variety of bones, upon which “East-West Relations” was written. The caption read, “Détente, heck, I was only hibernating.”<sup>95</sup> Yet another cartoon satirized the lackadaisical U.S. and Western response. It displayed the United Nations building with a face on it, but the mouth of the face had a gag over it. The caption said there was “all

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93. Gregory C. Ference and Paul Kubricht, “Caricaturing Czechoslovakia in American Political Cartoons,” in *The Portrayal of Czechoslovakia in the American Print Media, 1938-1989*, ed. Gregory C. Ference (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 132. Attached as Appendix A.

94. *Ibid.*, 133. Attached as Appendix B.

95. Ray Osrin, “Détente, Heck, I was only Hibernating,” *Plain Dealer*, August 22, 1968, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library and Museum, CGA.AC.B11.100 [21693]. Attached as Appendix C.



quiet on the Western front.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, even through political cartoons, it is clear that the Soviet and Warsaw Pact invasion, and U.S. response, was viewed with displeasure by many in America. The fact that a great deal of the content in American newspapers during the end of August of 1968 displayed solidarity with the Czechoslovaks and displeasure with America’s response, demonstrates that many in the country felt differently from those in the White House. Rather than ignoring the plight of an entire country to further personal and political goals, a large percentage of the American people felt some kind of action was needed, and that the policies exhibited thus far by the United States were unacceptable.

## **POLITICAL AND INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

The fact that there were differing opinions on how to handle the situation ultimately did not effect what the outcomes and consequences of the invasion would be. Although the Democratic National Convention, presidential election, and continuing conflict in Vietnam soon overshadowed the Czechoslovak crisis, the invasion nonetheless may have had important domestic political consequences. The invasion’s consequences on international diplomacy however, including relations between the U.S. and NATO and the U.S. and the Soviets, were much more visible and significant.

Domestically, the invasion probably did little more than arouse public anger at the Soviet Union and its allies. However, there is some evidence to suggest that it may have helped increase Richard Nixon and the Republican’s popularity at the expense of Hubert Humphrey and the Democrats in the 1968 presidential election, because the invasion

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96. Ray Osrin, “All Quiet on the Western Front,” *Plain Dealer*, August 24, 1968, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library and Museum, CGA.AC.B11.102 [21695]. Attached as Appendix D.

reaffirmed many Americans' beliefs that the Soviet Union was still a military threat.<sup>97</sup> Since many considered Nixon and the Republicans as being tougher on communism, they were able to use the invasion to their political advantage.<sup>98</sup> A 1968 Harris Poll concluded that the American people were once again convinced of the bellicose nature of the Soviet Union, and that the "Cold War was on all over again."<sup>99</sup> Additionally, the Gallup Poll registered major drops in popularity for the Democrats during the period following the invasion, while the republicans gained in popularity. Specifically, an August 25 poll showed that 41% of Americans now felt that Republicans could better secure peace for America, as opposed to only 23% who felt that the Democrats could.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, comments by such prominent democrats as Eugene McCarthy who said that the invasion was "not a major crisis" hurt the party's image.<sup>101</sup> The Republicans and Nixon used the invasion to their advantage. They immediately realized that they could use the Soviet action to strengthen their position. Frank Shakespeare, one of Nixon's publicists, exclaimed after hearing the news of the invasion, "What a break! This Czech thing is just perfect. It puts the soft-liners in a hell of a box!"<sup>102</sup> Humphrey seemed to feel the same way, acknowledging privately that news of the invasion had made things "more turbulent and more difficult—for me and for the Democratic Party."<sup>103</sup> Although there were of

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97. Vladimir V. Kusin, *From Dubcek to Charter 77* (Edinburgh: Q Press Ltd., 1978), 33.

98. Harry Schwartz, *Prague's 200 Days* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1969), 261.

99. "Administration Has Misjudged Nature, Aims of Communists, *Congressional Record-Extensions of Remarks*, September 26, 1968, 28809, HeinOnline, <http://www.heinonline.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1140022&id=1&size=2&collection=congrec&index=congrec/crei#591> (accessed February 19, 2010).

100. William P. Hansen and Fred L. Israel, eds., *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion 1935-1971 Vol. 3 1959-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 2121-2158.

101. Bennett Kovrig, *The Myth of Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 282.

102. Joe McGinniss, "The Selling of the President 1968," *Harper's Magazine*, August, 1969, 185, as quoted in Kovrig, *The Myth of Liberation*, 282.

103. Peter Gross (New York Times Service) in the *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), August 5, 1969, as quoted in Kovrig, *The Myth of Liberation*, 282.

course many other issues and factors that went into the presidential election of 1968, (such as Vietnam), given the vociferous and passionate response by many in the American public to the invasion, and to their general discontent with the way President Johnson handled the United States' foreign policy, it is conceivable some may have switched their support to Nixon, helping to boost his campaign for president.

One of the invasion's two major international implications that concerned the United States had to do with U.S.-NATO relations. In the year prior to the invasion, there had been a large-scale movement within the U.S. Congress to divest militarily and financially from involvement in Western Europe. Both the Mansfield Resolution and the Symington Amendment were trying to force major American troop withdrawals from Europe.<sup>104</sup> The Europeans as well seemed to be scaling back their efforts at maintaining NATO. The most obvious example was General Charles de Gaulle and the French withdrawal from NATO's military command in 1966, but even the West Germans had recently shown reluctance to keep spending on the alliance.<sup>105</sup> However, as soon as the invasion of Czechoslovakia took place, the issue of NATO cutbacks became moot. The Brezhnev Doctrine along with the realization that Moscow would still resort to violence dramatically demonstrated that the role and necessity of NATO had not diminished. The Johnson administration, perhaps surprisingly given its disinterest in using NATO to respond to the invasion, had always been in favor of maintaining the alliance's power. Secretary of Defense Clifford credited the Czechoslovak crisis for actually saving NATO and allowing the U.S. to reassert its dominance in Western Europe.<sup>106</sup> The alliance's

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104. Frank Costigliola, "LBJ, Germany, and 'the End of the Cold War,'" 208.

105. Gunter Bischof, "'No Action': The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968," 225.

106. Frank Costigliola, "LBJ, Germany, and 'the End of the Cold War,'" 208.

European members realized that their security was dependent upon NATO, and after the invasion, they critically evaluated their military preparedness. They determined that NATO had lost its military edge, and so began to improve the “quality, effectiveness, and deployment of NATO’s forces... in order to provide a better capability for defense.” The Western Europeans were thus roused from their lethargy, and responded by increasing not only their military expenditures, but manpower commitments as well. With the United States again taking a leading role, NATO soon became a revamped and revitalized alliance.<sup>107</sup> Although NATO’s response to the invasion demonstrated a certain level of political and military weakness, the events in Czechoslovakia provided the spark necessary for the required changes, and ultimately led to a restructuring and recommitment by the member states that improved the alliance’s strength.

In addition to the impact on U.S.-NATO relations, the invasion of Czechoslovakia affected America’s relations with the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. However, the Johnson administration’s response to the invasion kept the diplomatic consequences to a minimum. Because of the overriding priority of improving both the situation in Vietnam and the prospects for détente, the White House did nothing of substance to reproach the Soviets, and therefore did not harm relations. In fact, aside from Czechoslovakia and its citizens, Johnson himself arguably suffered the most from the few temporary setbacks that did occur. The President had to postpone his planned arms-reduction summit meeting so as not to be seen as too condoning of the invasion, and the Senate, because of its “mood... with Moscow” did not approve the Nuclear

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107. Robert Rhodes James, ed., *The Czechoslovak Crisis 1968* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 83-90.

Nonproliferation Treaty.<sup>108</sup> Johnson had hoped that these two items would be the capstone of his presidency, and that they would positively affect his legacy. Instead, much to his dismay, both measures came to fruition early in Nixon's presidency. Another setback in relations was the discontinuation of bridge building, but this too was only temporary. As early as November of 1968, a mere three months after the invasion, détente and building better relations was once again a priority, and by November of the following year, significant progress had been made.<sup>109</sup> The White House publicly admitted that there was "no change" in its policy towards Moscow following the invasion.<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, it was only an "inconvenient bump on the road to détente." The Johnson White House clearly knew its priorities and assistance—either moral or otherwise to Czechoslovakia—was not important.<sup>111</sup> This detached policy may have prevented an escalation in East-West tensions and the continued hope for progress towards détente, but it also signaled a strategic defeat for the United States. Occupied by factors such as the Vietnam War, the country relegated its past actions and rhetoric to the sidelines, and inaction came to the forefront. An episode of, at worst, political incompetency, and at best, strategic indifference, manifested itself in the White House in the second half of 1968.

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108. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 490.

109. Roger E. Kanet, "Czechoslovakia and the Future of Soviet Foreign Policy," in *The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia: Its Effects on Eastern Europe*, ed. E.J. Czerwinski and Jaroslaw Piekalkiewicz (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1972), 102.

110. Isaac D. Levine, *Intervention* (Philadelphia: McKay, 1969), 70.

111. Gunter Bischof, "No Action": The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968," 228.

## ALTERNATIVE RESPONSES

Alternative opinions existed that posited that the United States could have responded differently to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in ways that could have avoided both war and a major breakdown in relations. Direct military action was undoubtedly not an option, but implementing varying levels and forms of diplomatic action such as sanctions or more forceful rhetoric were, and were proposed by Congressional Representatives, diplomats and other government officials, newspaper editors, émigrés, and many others. However, Johnson decided against taking the path of aggressive diplomacy. Concern and preoccupation with the overriding conflict in Vietnam and with nuclear arms limitation certainly helped style his response, but much of the responsibility for the United States' inaction regarding the invasion must still fall upon Johnson's shoulders. By examining and understanding both his political and personal goals (within the larger context of Vietnam), it is possible to surmise why he acted, felt, and responded as he did, and why the White House responded as it did.

Almost no one contends that the United States should have responded militarily to the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. The U.S. and NATO were woefully unprepared for any outbreak of hostilities in Europe. The Western powers faced a "less than desirable level of battle-readiness," along with "shortfalls in men and material."<sup>112</sup> Of course, Vietnam also had the United States bogged down. Furthermore, Secretary of State Rusk made it very clear that any Western military intervention "would mean World War III," and "nuclear war."<sup>113</sup> Obviously, no one was willing to go to such extremes for

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112. "Record of Meeting of the Senior Interdepartmental Group," October 4, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 24.

113. "Minutes of Cabinet Meeting," August 22, 1968, *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Gale Cengage Learning, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/servlet/DDRS?vrsn=>

the sake of Czechoslovakia's political freedom, nor does this paper suggest that they should have.

However, President Johnson and his administration could have taken specific measures to better respond to, or perhaps even prevent, the violent invasion of Czechoslovakia. The threat of sanctions in the UN, warnings about the negative effects on U.S.-Soviet relations and projects, and rhetoric that emphasized such consequences were some of the avenues available to White House policy makers. In fact, this is largely the course of action that the U.S. Congress recommended, and additionally, is what many newspapers and prominent individuals proposed. Instead, Johnson decided not to employ these measures, largely out of either an unpreparedness, or unwillingness to do so. The result was that President Johnson came off as both unconcerned with Czechoslovakia and even complicit in its conquest. Many in the Congress and public concluded that he was too focused on not only détente, but on his narrow personal and political agenda (such as improving his legacy) to respond properly to a major international crisis.

An irony about the events surrounding the invasion of Czechoslovakia is that an incident that arose during that crisis demonstrated that the United States perhaps could have effectively used much tougher diplomacy. Romania refused take part in the Warsaw Pact invasion and its liberal (at least at that time) leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, vehemently denounced the violation of Czechoslovakia's sovereignty. Such a stance upset the hard-liners in Moscow, who had just invaded Czechoslovakia to suppress among other things anti-Soviet sentiment. Their response was to begin to amass Soviet and other Warsaw Pact troops along the border with Romania, in an apparent indication

of a possible invasion. U.S. intelligence services became aware of these troop movements, and alerted the White House. On August 28, a greatly alarmed and defensive President Johnson (he was still taking criticism from all sides over his handling of the Czechoslovak situation) instructed Secretary of State Rusk to discuss this matter with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin. The Secretary firmly warned Dobrynin that any move against Romania would have serious consequences.<sup>114</sup> On August 30, President Johnson addressed this issue himself when he said during a speech in San Antonio that a Soviet move against Romania might “unleash the dogs of war.”<sup>115</sup> Also on August 30, Secretary Rusk again summoned Dobrynin to see him. Rusk warned the Ambassador yet again about the severe consequences that a move into Romania would have, and said, “he wished in the name of all humanity” that another invasion not occur because its results “would be incalculable.”<sup>116</sup> It is clear that these warnings quickly registered with the Kremlin, because later that same day Dobrynin delivered a message assuring the U.S. that there would be no attack on Romania.<sup>117</sup> This instance of forceful diplomacy backed by strong rhetoric, and even threats, appears to have resonated with the Soviets and averted another invasion. Given that the White House was successful in helping to stave off a threat to Romania, the question naturally arises as to whether such warnings about the implications of an invasion of Czechoslovakia could have persuaded the Soviets to act differently. Of course, no one can know, but it is certainly not impossible to posit that the Soviet leaders might have acted differently and without force had the American

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114. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 182-183.

115. Gunter Bischof, “‘No Action’: The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968,” 222.

116. “Telegram from the Department of State to the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” August 31, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 90.

117. Gunter Bischof, “‘No Action’: The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968,” 222.



government made them fear the consequences of an attack on Czechoslovakia. The action with Romania demonstrated that firm diplomacy still worked with the Soviets, and suggests that had it been used before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, events might have transpired differently.

However, even after the invasion of Czechoslovakia occurred, the United States could have responded differently. Instead of responding with cliché rhetoric and action, the White House could have been more assertive. Such action would not have had to constitute a threat to world peace, nor even result in major setbacks in U.S.-Soviet relations. The United States did have some economic and political leverage that it did not employ against the Soviets, who even in the worst political climates probably would not have severed relations with America.<sup>118</sup> Aside from rhetorically standing up more forcefully for Czechoslovakia's sovereignty, the U.S. could have intentionally cut back on cultural and economic ties with the invading countries. Senate Resolution 387 proposed such measures, proving that such ideas were widespread and well received. Although relatively speaking, there was not much economic cooperation to begin with, cutting what did exist could have been significant for the aggressors, especially in the areas of technology and agriculture. At the same time, the U.S. could have extended economic and cultural inducements to Yugoslavia and Romania, further supporting the more independent nations. Additionally, the U.S. could have suspended bilateral projects of particular interest to the Soviets, such as civil air agreements and consular conventions. Notably, many upper level State Department officials advocated these types of measures. In the wake of a violent invasion, they said that it should be realistic to

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118. Fritz Ermarth, *Internationalism, Security, and Legitimacy: The Challenge to Soviet Interests in East Europe, 1964-68* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1969), 115.

expect that cultural exchanges, technology sharing agreements, and even arms negotiations would suffer setbacks.<sup>119</sup>

The White House could have pursued other multilateral actions. American pressure in the United Nations, especially within the General Assembly where the Soviets did not have a veto, might have resulted in resolutions that provided at least moral if not humanitarian aid. Even sanctions might have been a possibility. Had the U.S. and Western allies pushed the issue further, perhaps they could have accomplished more, even if it merely related to assisting refugees or having neutral observers monitor the situation. The State Department was active in pursuing such options, and had even prepared contingency papers to help guide U.S. action in the UN.<sup>120</sup> Because of Johnson's inaction, "even less was done than in the Hungarian crisis in 1956," in which the UN faced criticism for its lack of action.<sup>121</sup>

NATO officials also discussed how more could have been done to respond to the attack. Certainly, military action would have been imprudent, but stronger rhetoric could have applied pressure to the invaders, and at least let the public know of the alliance's displeasure with the situation. Furthermore, NATO could have scaled back its contacts with Warsaw Pact countries, and joined the United States in finding nonaggressive ways to reprimand the invaders. West German Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger pushed for a NATO summit meeting to discuss what the alliance's reaction should be, and if it would be wise to adopt such measures.<sup>122</sup>

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119. William E. Griffith, "U.S. Policy and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia," in *Czechoslovakia Intervention and Impact*, ed. I. William Zartman (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 56-57.

120. "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," July 12, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 17, *Eastern Europe*, doc. 66.

121. Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 758.

122. Gunter Bischof, "No Action": The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968," 227.

Because the United States did not take more forceful and determined action following the invasion, it faced international criticism of collusion with the Soviets.<sup>123</sup> Although Western Europe as a whole reacted even more passively than did the U.S., the French, along with many in the third world, attacked the White House and the country for what they perceived as an acknowledgement of ‘spheres of influence.’ Even domestically, President Johnson and Secretary Rusk had to deny repeatedly that there was any sort of *quid pro quo* relating American passivity towards Czechoslovakia to Soviet passivity in Vietnam.<sup>124</sup> Although there is no evidence to back up such accusations, they point to the larger failings of American policy in the days and weeks following the Czechoslovak crisis. There may not have been formal collusion, but the United States pursued a policy of “hands off” inaction when confronted with the possibility of a Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.<sup>125</sup> Such attitudes and policies, particularly as embodied by President Johnson, may very well have given the Soviets the impression that they could act with impunity. Johnson’s broader attitudes and desires also helped to facilitate the Soviet and Warsaw Pact moves, and to a significant degree were responsible for the character of the White House’s reaction.

## CONCLUSION

International factors such as Vietnam, domestic problems and unrest, and President Johnson’s personal politics and agenda must share the blame for a failed Czechoslovak policy. Mired in Vietnam, very focused on arms limitation, and distracted

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123. Frank Costigliola, “LBJ, Germany, and ‘the End of the Cold War,’” 209.

124. Ibid.

125. Gunter Bischof, “‘No Action’: The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968,” 225.

by politics at home, Johnson was unable to implement an effective or forceful response to Soviet aggression. Aside from the larger context of Vietnam and domestic concerns, to understand why Johnson acted as he did, and why he responded so passively when the invasion of Czechoslovakia occurred, one must examine his personal and political priorities. By August of 1968 Johnson was a defeated and lame duck president who feared that the conflict in Vietnam would be his lasting legacy. In order to try to avoid this, he attempted to gain one last major foreign policy victory. He pushed hard and consistently for a summit with the Soviet leaders to discuss nuclear arms limitation. Johnson also hoped that a breakthrough with the Soviets could help solidify the beginnings of détente. Because the President was strongly committed to peace and bilateral cooperation, he did not want to damage that process. Ultimately, if being non-confrontational about Czechoslovakia meant that Johnson could achieve his long sought after personal and political goals, then so be it.

Even beginning with the early days of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson made it clear that he was desirous of peace. Within hours of taking the oath of office, he met with Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, and promised that “no day would go by in which I and my administration would not be working hard to ease world tensions and bring peace closer to us all.”<sup>126</sup> This theme persisted throughout his tenure, with the President often making speeches promoting peace and cooperation, and warning of the consequences of war and hostilities.<sup>127</sup> Towards the end of his time in office, including

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126. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 463, as quoted in Lerner, “Trying to Find the Guy Who Invited Them: Lyndon Johnson, Bridge Building, and the End of the Prague Spring,” 82.

127. Lerner, “Trying to Find the Guy Who Invited Them: Lyndon Johnson, Bridge Building, and the End of the Prague Spring,” 82.

during the Czechoslovak crisis, the President maintained his “desire to leave office as a peacemaker.”<sup>128</sup>

Clearly, one of President Johnson’s motives for reaching an agreement with the Soviets over nuclear arms was his desire for peace and cooperation not only in Vietnam, but between the two superpowers as well. Many historians and politicians see the President as having pushed “desperately, even pathetically,” for a summit, even after the invasion.<sup>129</sup> As early as September 5 1968, the President was already trying to reschedule his meeting with Moscow. Johnson “displayed an unseemly eagerness to embrace the Soviet leadership in public,” and get something accomplished in his final weeks as President. It was actually up to many of his staff and advisors to restrain him, and call for more discretion. They feared that such a display of affection towards the Soviets so soon after the invasion would be a public relations and diplomatic disaster.<sup>130</sup> Although Johnson had invested much into a meeting in Moscow, many have interpreted such a stubborn adherence to the notion of a summit as a mere attempt at public aggrandizement and legacy building.<sup>131</sup> An agreement on nuclear arms reductions was certainly something the President honestly desired, but the extent to which he pursued it, and at the cost of other American interests (such as supporting democracy and liberalization) in Eastern Europe, not to mention Czechoslovakia, makes his stubbornness seem self-serving.

It is clear from the administration’s actions that the invasion of Czechoslovakia was just not that important to them, at least given what else they were facing. The

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128. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam*, 220.

129. *Ibid.*, 221.

130. Jeremi Suri, “Lyndon Johnson and the Global Disruption,” in *Looking Back at LBJ: White House Politics in a New Light*, ed. Mitchell Lerner (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 68.

131. *Ibid.*, 69

President was much more concerned with furthering détente, meeting with the Soviet leadership, passing the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, building upon broader themes of peace, and yes, improving his tarnished legacy. Détente and arms limitation were certainly very important, although they did not change the fact that for the past two decades the U.S. government had been engaged in both a public and covert war of support for the freedom and liberty of Eastern Europe, or that Johnson's policies now clearly deviated from those past actions. What is more, by attempting to court the favor and cooperation of the Soviets, Johnson jeopardized his own modest successes with bridge building.

The dichotomy that emerged between past and current action probably is most apparent when recalling Johnson's initial reaction to news of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. As Ambassador Dobrynin recalled, Johnson was unmoved and seemingly uninterested. He was instead more concerned about the prospects of his meeting with the Soviet leaders, and of engaging in banal small talk.<sup>132</sup> Only after his staff prodded him into action did he respond, and then only with the bare minimum required to attempt to save face.

The American Congress and public were outraged, but Johnson and the White House continued to cling to naïve hopes and desires. President Johnson had many opportunities and means to respond differently and without leading to war or serious fallout in U.S.-Soviet relations, but he did not. Because of this, he suffered comparisons to Neville Chamberlin's Czechoslovak policy in 1938.<sup>133</sup> Many came to regard Johnson

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132. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 180-181.

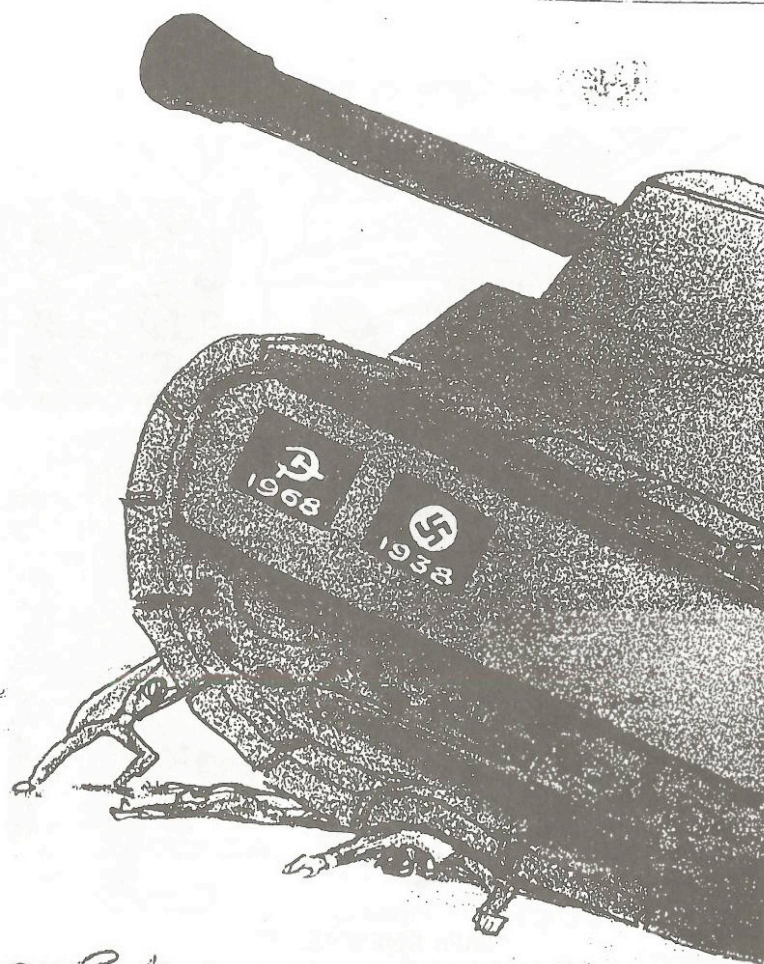
133. Joseph Wechsberg, *The Voices*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 111. Chamberlin's policy of appeasing Nazi Germany during the 1938 Munich Conference led to the dismemberment and occupation of Czechoslovakia

as a “hypocritical... Western liberal, who did not move a finger” to help Czechoslovakia.<sup>134</sup> Johnson and the White House’s official policy of ‘no action’ and ‘non-interference’ when it came to saving Czechoslovakia from aggression not only broke with America’s rhetorical precedent for dealing with Eastern Europe, but signaled to the Soviet Union that the Warsaw Pact had a green light to do as it pleased. The invasion of Czechoslovakia unfortunately proved that President Johnson was ultimately unwilling and unable to respond effectively to this major European incident, and that the U.S. government once again demonstrated that rhetorical and even physical, concrete support for freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe did not mean that such support would manifest itself when it was most needed.

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134. Ivan Svitak, “The Premature Perestroika,” in *The Prague Spring: A Mixed Legacy*, ed. Jiri Pehe (London: Freedom House, 1988), 181.

Appendix A



Invasion Of Czechoslovakia II



Appendix B



Appendix C



'DETENTE, HECK, I WAS ONLY HIBERNATING.'

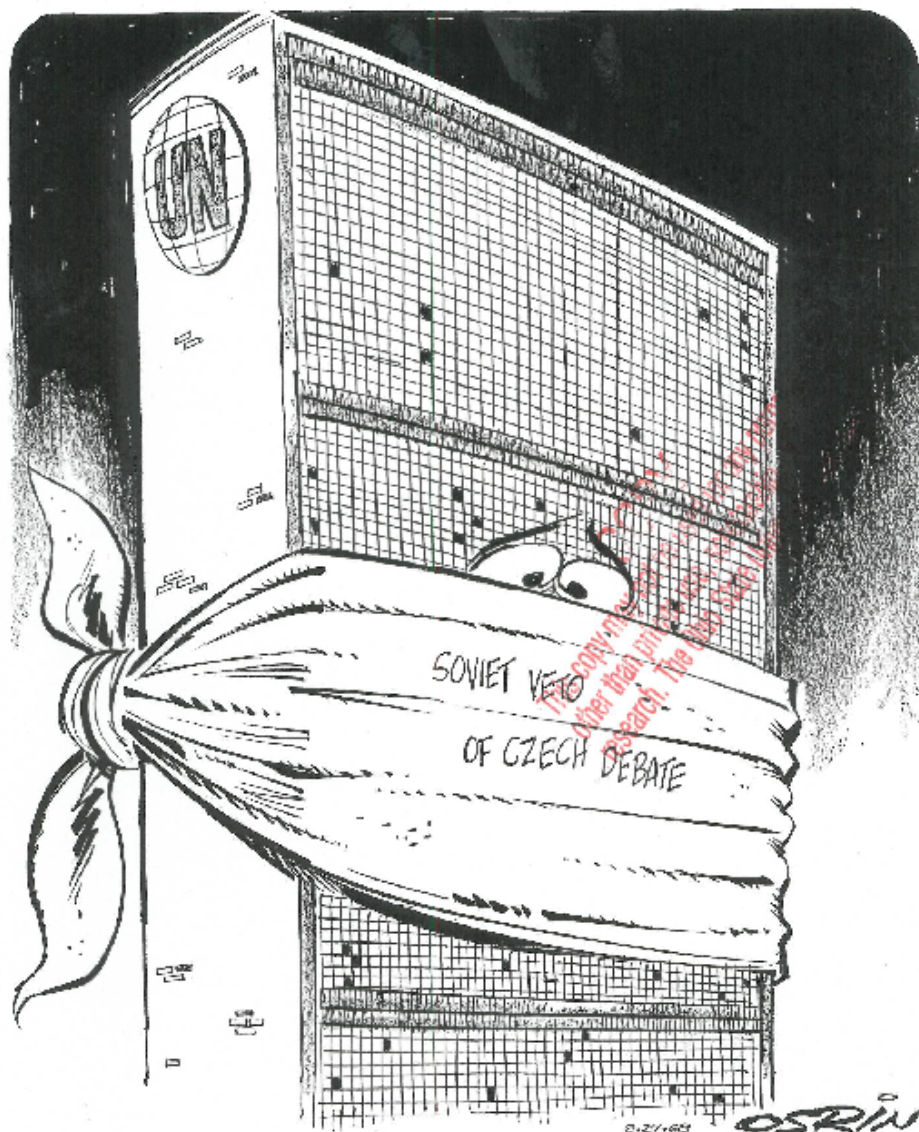
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Appendix D

SAT. ENDOCRINE GARDEN 1

58



ALL QUARTERS ON THE WESTERN FRONT

59

AL 1311 102

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